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HABS/HAER—Moving Forward with the Past

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The Historic American Buildings Survey / Historic American Engineering Record (HABS / HAER) Division of the National Park Service is a unique Federal program whose responsibility is to document America's architectural, engineering and industrial heritage. HABS, the older of the two, was founded in 1933, making it the oldest Federal program dealing with the preservation of the built environment. The establishment of the HAER program in 1969 recognized the distinctions between architectural and engineering documentation. Prior to that time, HABS had recorded engineering and industrial sites along with its better-known efforts to record buildings. The genesis of HABS was the high unemployment rate among architects during the Great Depression coupled with concern and alarm over the continuing rapid disappearance of buildings representing the Nation's cultural patrimony. Linked with the emphasis on threatened buildings was the complementary need for documentation for the proper care and maintenance of unthreatened historic buildings. Indeed, one of the early sets of HABS drawings was for the Moore House at Yorktown, the first structure for which the National Park Service produced a historic structure report.

HABS was created administratively under a tripartite agreement among the Library of Congress, the American Institute of Architects, and the National Park Service. Legislative authority came with the passage of the Historic Sites Act two years later. With that authority came

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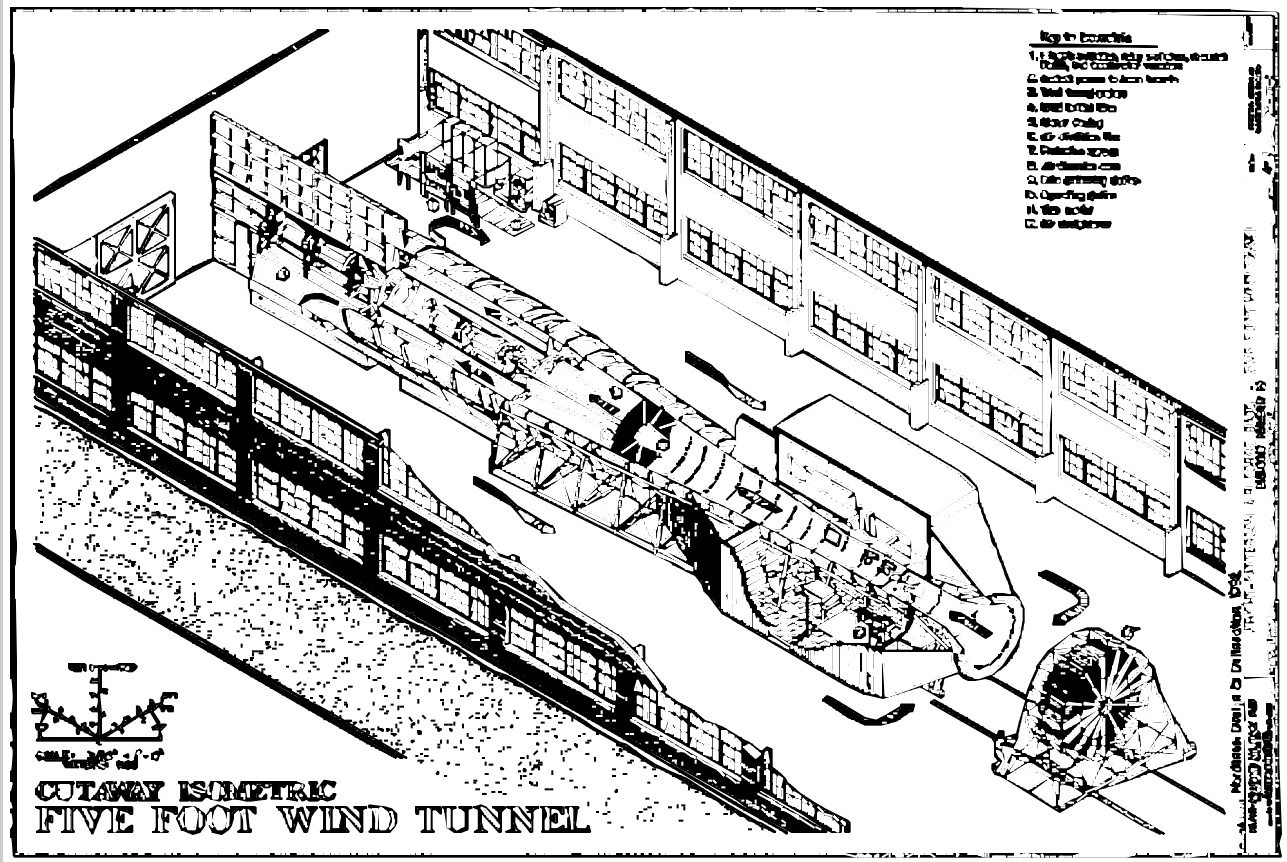

Isometric of Five Foot Wind Tunnel, Area B, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Delineated by Hardlines: Design & Delineation, 1992. (See article, page 16.)

smaller size. Fourteen sheets make up the distance from the Lincoln Memorial to the zoo-tunnel headwall, and three versions were generated: the hard features such as roads, bridges, and buildings, and 2' contour lines; the plantings, showing tree canopy, labeled specimen trees with trunk placement; and a photographically combined set of overlays. Alignment of the overlays was achieved using pin-bar registration. Though labor-intensive tasks such as stippling innumerable contour lines and determining boundaries were tedious, techniques such as airbrushing the extensive stream and waterfront area was innovative, fast, and provided a consistency of texture.

In addition to the plans and a key sheet, the architects and landscape architects generated two sheets of historic plans and proposals, two sheets of bridge elevations, and one sheet of landscape sections. The historic plans show the contrasting closed-valley (to contain the creek and fill the void) and open-valley options (as seen today) posed in 1908, followed by the gradual elimination of parkway features, shown in plans of 1916, 1924, and 1933. Nine bridges are drawn at 1"=20' scale, assembled as "poster" sheets. They were not measured because they are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia, and funding would have had to come from outside the Park Service. The side-by-side elevations succeed in visualizing the sequence of what appears before the motorist's eyes, from the cluttered area by the mouth of the creek where the simple, low-slung arches are faced with ashlar, to the more elaborate and monumental masonry crossings at the deepest point of the valley.

The historians researched the parkway to its fullest, all the way driving the scope of drawings. A sizable report covers the parkway's chronology from its foundations in the City Beautiful Movement and the early history of Washington, DC, through design options, legislation, acquisition of land, construction, and alterations to it after completion in 1936. The context of related structures is dealt with here, as well as in the form of individual HABS and HAER histories. All the bridges—vehicular and pedestrian—crossing and carrying the parkway are cataloged, as are two privately owned service stations. Though by definition parkways are devoid of commercial buildings, automobile service stations were a necessary evil made tolerable by sympathetic styling, usually rustic or Colonial Revival. Locally, the Shipstead-Luce Act of 1930 required that the design of structures adjacent to Federal park land be reviewed by the Commission of Fine Arts. The two examples along the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway are a contrast unto themselves—a dark, gabled rustic block with slate roof, and a clean Neoclassical limestone cross plan. Erected on the fringe streets convenient to the parkway, such buildings are integral to studying the motor age while sympathetic to the parkway setting. Higgins Service Station on Virginia Avenue is, in fact, one of the few instances of commercial rustic styling in the city, and indicative of what the Park Service might have built for itself. The historian chronicled the importance of these in terms of designers, engineers, and their role in serving vehicular traffic in the area.

Large-format photography is used to its fullest potential, combining contemporary views with historic images. HABS photographer Jack E. Boucher made aerial views from 500'-1,000', as well as from the pedestrian level, which include details of ornament and construction. Whenever possible, "now" views are taken of constructions, vistas, and sites for which "then" pictures are available.

In retrospect, the documentation of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was a productive documentation and pilot project. A comprehensive assemblage of drawings, photographs, and written history more than adequately serves the needs of FHWA and NPS officials, while introducing a new kind of site to the HABS/HAER collection—one served by both engineering and architectural sides of the HABS/HAER Division.

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a unique provision that allowed HABS and, subsequently, HAER to seek and use outside resources to conduct their mandated work. That provision has been the basis for hundreds of cooperative projects undertaken with parks, other Federal, state and local agencies, private organizations, and even individuals.

Increasingly over the past decade, HABS and HAER documentation projects have been driven by stewardship needs. Cultural resource managers use benchmark documentation as the basis for maintenance decisions, for assessing conditions, for planning appropriate treatments, and for public information and interpretation. Stewardship is thus a common thread among recent recording projects. Given the huge number of historic structures in the United States, the need for adequate documentation is clearly enormous but unfortunately the resources to accomplish that work are clearly limited. For that reason, HABS/HAER is developing new techniques and technologies to address that need within the realities of time and fiscal constraints. Several of the articles in this issue of *CRM* highlight recent work with photogrammetry and computer-aided-drafting, or CAD. Another evolution in the two programs derives from the ever-broadening definition of what constitutes the historic built environment. HABS, for instance, is recording the design of highways in the landscape. HAER is studying a major industry, steel, simultaneously in several regions of the country; as well as rapidly evolving, and therefore ephemeral, technologies such as the development of military aviation. The articles which follow were compiled to represent these and other current methodologies, practices, and technologies used in HABS and HAER documentation projects.

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